

Problems that keep us from Jesus, Part 1 - Acts 21:20-24 – August 16th, 2009

- Paul has only been in Jerusalem a couple of days on this his third and final missionary journey, and he's already facing some problems.
- It's interesting that these problems that Paul and the early church are up against then - are the same problems we are up against now.
- Of course we know that the times are different, the names are different, and the places are different, but the problems are the same.
- The problem with these problems is that they become obstacles and hindrances to a personal and saving relationship with Jesus Christ.
- It is for this reason that I have carefully and prayerfully titled this series; "Problems that keep us from Jesus."
- As we now round a corner in our study of Acts 21, we will begin to uncover and identify a number of these problems.
- Again, by way of reminder, and introduction to our text, it's important we connect the dots in our understanding of the passage.

1. Traditions and customs (Verses 20b-21)

20b ...Then they said to Paul: "You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law. 21 They have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs.

- v20b The Jerusalem elders go from praises to problems by apprising Paul of a how thousands of believing Jews who still kept the law.
- v21 They tell Paul that he's been accused of teaching these believing Jews to turn away from Moses, circumcision and Jewish customs.

As one commentator put it; "The Jerusalem Jews had been well stuffed with the lies the Jerusalem church elders now rehearsed in the ears of Paul. ...that Paul was teaching Jews to become apostates. ...Paul was presumed guilty until he proved himself innocent."

- The Apostle now has an enormous problem to deal with, because he's up against the traditions and customs of these Jewish believers.
- I believe that one of the biggest problems that keep people from Jesus Christ is the adherence to the traditions and customs of man.
- Paul in his letter to the Colossians warns the believers to beware of mans traditions which are according the principles of this world.

Colossians 2:8 Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ NKJV

- Jesus confronted this head on when he was falsely accused of allowing His disciples to break the traditions of the elders in Jerusalem.

Mark 7:1-13 1 The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and 2 saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were "unclean," that is, unwashed. 3(The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. 4 When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.) 5 So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with 'unclean' hands?" 6 He replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: "'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. 7 They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.' 8 You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men." 9 And he said to them: "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! 10 For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.' 11 But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban' (that is, a gift devoted to God), 12 then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. 13 Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that." NIV

2. Appeasing and pleasing (Verses 22-24)

22 What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come, 23 so do what we tell you. There are four men with us who have made a vow. 24 Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everybody will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law.

- v22 We're told they try to figure out what to do knowing that those making these accusations would certainly hear that Paul was there.
- v23 They come up with an idea with four men's vows and tell Paul what he should do in order to both appease and please his accusers.
- v24 They tell Paul to join with these men in their ritual purification and even pay their expenses so the accusers will know he's innocent.

"Even the Jewish Christians were prejudiced against Paul, how much more would the unbelieving Jews be irritated at his presence! The elders, therefore, proposed that he should show himself to be friendly to the law of Moses by joining in one of those actions which were hardly ever performed except by the zealous."

Charles Spurgeon

- It's important to understand what the Nazarite vow was; you would grow your hair long, not drink any wine, nor eat grapes and raisins.
- Also, you were not to touch anything dead, and for a certain period of time you would devote yourself completely and totally to the Lord.
- Now, at the end of the vow, you would go into the temple, spend seven days worshiping God, cut off your hair and burn it as an offering.
- If anyone is interested in taking this vow you may wish to read and understand Numbers chapter six, which has all the requirements.
- Some believe that it was this Nazarite vow that Paul had taken earlier when he was the city of Corinth as we're told in Acts chapter 18.

Acts 18:18 Paul stayed on in Corinth for some time. Then he left the brothers and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. Before he sailed, he had his hair cut off at Cenchrea because of a vow he had taken. NIV

- Why do I take the time to go into so much detail about this vow and Paul being asked to pay their expenses, probably from his offering?
- Here are a couple of reasons; appeasing and pleasing man is expensive, it's complicated, and worst of all, and it never actually works.
- What if I were to say to you that it is infinitely easier to be a God pleaser than a man pleaser, and pleasing man can send you to hell.

Galatians 1:9-10 9 As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned! 10 Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ. NIV

- In other words, if one tries to please man in order to win the approval of men at the expense of pleasing God he's not Christ's servant.
- One might ask, is Paul being a man pleaser by himself taking this vow, and even paying the expense of these four men's vows?

"He had shown them that their ceremonies were *useless* but not *destructive*; that they were only dangerous when they depended on them for salvation."

Adam Clarke

1 Corinthians 9:19-23 19 Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. 20 To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. 21 To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. 22 To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. 23 I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. NIV